

U.S. Attorney's Report to the District

October is Bullying Prevention Month. Bullying in schools is not an inevitable part of childhood or a rite of passage. It is a serious public safety issue which can have lasting negative consequences, for both the bully and the bully's victims. Bullies who lack empathy and resort to violence mature into adults who are more likely to enter the criminal justice system as defendants. In extreme cases it can lead to suicide. In just one example in this district, Seth Walsh, a gay teen who was relentlessly bullied in a Kern County middle school, tragically took his own life in 2010, at age 13. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, victims of bullying are at increased risk for mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, while youth who bully others are at increased risk for substance abuse, academic problems, and violence later in adolescence and adulthood.

Bullying often takes place in or near elementary or middle schools. The anonymity and popularity of on-line social networks, however, has created a new forum in which non-physical bullying – harassment and humiliation which can be just as damaging – has proliferated.

Bullies often target victims who appear to be “different.” Gay students, Muslims, Sikhs, and students with disabilities are all frequent targets of bullying in schools. Bullies who base their conduct on these types of victim characteristics may be violating federal civil rights laws, which the U.S. Department of Justice is responsible for enforcing. Where physical violence is involved, the conduct may constitute a federal hate crime.

The key to reducing bullying, however, is in changing attitudes which allow bullying to occur. Deaths from drunk driving and domestic violence have plummeted over the last few decades. Enforcing laws which punish that behavior played a part, but the biggest contributor was a shift in social norms which made it no longer acceptable to drink and drive, or to beat a spouse. Similarly, raising awareness about the prevalence and consequences of bullying can help reduce it over the long term.

The President, the Attorney General, and the U.S. Department of Justice are all playing a part in reducing bullying. Last year, the President hosted a White House Conference on Bullying Prevention. The Attorney General has participated in several anti-bullying events, and two years ago launched the Defending Childhood Initiative, an effort to reduce the exposure of children to violence, including bullying, through research, grants, and the development of community strategies. The Department of Justice and other federal agencies developed a website with numerous resources on combatting bullying, www.stopbullying.gov. My colleague Melinda Haag, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of California, last month hosted a two-day summit on bullying prevention, which included participation by the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, state and federal officials, educators, and experts. This office partnered with KCRA in a prime-time special on bullying that aired in Sacramento on October 9.

Bullying will not disappear from schools anytime soon. But this office, along with many others, will continue to work towards the day when all young people can attend school free from the fear of violence, intimidation and harassment.

If you would like to communicate with our office, contact the main number in Sacramento, or submit a suggestion by clicking on the button below. Thank you.

United States Attorney

Benjamin B. Wagner